DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 346 RC 015 860

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TITLE School Consolidation: Easing the Transition. Administrative Report.
INSTITUTION San Mateo County Office of Education, Redwood City, CA. SMERC Information Center.
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Community Involvement; Community Support; *Consolidated Schools; *Cooperative Planning; Educational Change; Elementary Schools; Elementary Secondary Education; Mergers; Parent Role; Parent School Relationship; *Public Relations; *School Closing; *School Community Relationship; School Support; Staff Role; Student Needs

ABSTRACT

Changing population patterns, inflated housing costs, and cuts in school financing have forced many school districts to face school closures and school consolidation as a way of maintaining solvency. This report reviews the literature on school consolidation with attention to the fact that the need to consolidate now faces elementary schools as well as junior and senior high schools. The shift in school-neighborhood alliances may leave deep scars in school-community relations, or it may provide an opportunity for the lay public and educators to work together in a cooperative venture to maintain and perhaps even to raise the quality of educational programs in their districts. The experience of school districts that have consolidated indicates that the keys to success are planning, communication, and community involvement. Planning should involve community and staff at every step beginning with the initial study to identify the drawbacks and benefits of consolidation. Communication must include students, parents, and teachers and must keep them all informed of plans, progress, and what to expect next. Communication strategies can include newsletters, open house and community meetings, parent association meetings, student assemblies, and local media. Community involvement has been accomplished by establishing committees for joint activities with equal representation from all schools involved. Notes and references are appended. (JHZ)

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ED272346

Administrative Report

SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION: EASING THE TRANSITION

by

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JUN 1986
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March 1985

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This report is a review of the literature on a current educational topic. It is intended to be an unbaised summary and does not necessarily reflect the positions or opinions of the San Mateo County Office of Education or its staff.

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RC 015860

SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION: EASING THE TRANSITION

Changing population patterns, inflated housing costs, and cuts in school financing have forced many school districts to face school closures and school consolidation as a way of maintaining solvency. The results of the shift in school-neighborhood alliances had the potential for leaving deep scars in school-community relations, or for providing an opportunity for the lay public and educators to work together in a cooperative venture to maintain, and perhaps even to raise the level of educational programs in their districts.

What has been the experience of school districts that have been forced to consolidate? Have any guidelines been developed to help districts that elect to consolidate schools?

Much of the literature is at the junior and senior high school level. I have attempted to present information that would be relevant for elementary school consolidation efforts.

A search of the literature indicates strongly that consolidation needs: 1) planning; 2) communication; and 3) community involvement to be effective. When there was community involvement at every step, consolidation when smoothly. Parents and the public in general need to be reminded that transitions are difficult for everyone. Difficulties involved are those of a personal nature; friends are separated, administrative difficulties such as collecting and redistributing records arise, and the educational programs and teaching styles of several schools must be meshed. The literature shows, however, that parents are supportive once they realize their children will be in a school with a strong educational program, a diversified staff, and good support services.

An important element of a successful transition is getting parents to think about what their children gain in a new school rather than dwelling on the financial merits of school closing.[1] Just as the closing of school marks the end of an era, transition to a new school marks the beginning of a new era. At the same time it is suggested that the closing of a school should be officially recognized and commemorated so that it doesn't just fade away without fond memories.[2]

It might be helpful for future consolidation efforts, for a school district to document the experiences of children, parents and teachers for a year or two after a school is closed. A great deal of publicity is usually generated during the process of closing a school, and much of it may be negative. The literature shows, however, that most parents and students adapt well to the new circumstances.[3]

Let's look specifically at the three elements that seem to come up repeatedly in the literature as necessary for a smooth consolidation.

1. PLANNING

A first step might be to study the existing programs and identify positive and negative effects that might result from consolidation. This could be done by establishing a planning committee or task force of teachers, students and parents. A task force can be valuable in gaining community input and support, and in reducing ignorance about consolidation plans. For example, a task force can be instrumental in planning assemblies, planning a calendar of events, or soliciting ideas from students, staff and parents.[4]

Consolidation will work smoothly if community and staff are involved in every step.[5] Have this committee work with the administration in establishing a program that gradually combines selected facets of the

operations of all the schools involved. Plan as many combined school functions as possible without disrupting the total educational program.

As much time as possible should be spent in preparing the children for change and alleviating their anxiety by talking about the other school(s) and focusing on their similarities. In an Illinois elementary school, soon after school assignments were made, children received letters from "pen pals" at their new schools. This was followed up by visiting their future schools, touring the buildings and sitting in on classes with their pen pals.[6] A junior high school in Ohio instituted a buddy system and held a summer school day camp to ease the transition.[7]

As a result of activities such as these, students seemed to be less apprehensive and, in fact, many were excited about attending their new school.

2. COMMUNICATION

Public relations has played an important part in successful consolidation efforts. Keep students, parents, teachers informed via newsletters, open house and community meetings, PTA meetings, student assemblies, and through the use of local media. Keep them informed of planning and the progress being made and what to expect. Follow up rumors and make sure they're corrected, if necessary.[8]

Combat any rivalry that might historically have existed between schools through public relations efforts that focus on new plans, establishing new traditions and policies. In one community where two high schools were merged, the consolidation plan was designed with considerable student input which ensured student support and, in turn, influenced the parents.

The advice of the principal of this high school is to keep the students informed, since they are most affected by any change. He further suggests that you keep in mind that even after all plans are completed and thoroughly explained, you'll still have some parents who are disgruntled. A continued positive public relations campaign is a must, even after the merger or consolidation takes place.[9]

Coffee hours and small group meetings of ten to fifteen people seem to be successful ways to effectively explain plans and avoid hostility and extreme emotions.[10] Keep staff informed through regular in-house publications and staff development sessions to prepare for any new instructional programs.

3. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

A K-12 district in Paramus, N.J., found that "as the student population shrinks, so does our base for parental support. But we're offsetting that decline of traditional support by increasing parent participation in school programs and by showing our community that our schools have something to offer."[11]

Many accounts in the literature suggest establishing committees for joint activities with equal representation from all schools involved. Visitations also prove successful, because the "unknown is most threatening when it remains the unknown."[12] Class visits between schools and parent visits to different schools have been effective. Opportunities for parents and students to meet new teachers and administrators at picnics, parties, and other events, help to "break the ice" and make parents and students feel welcome at the new school.[13]

Let's look at some of the specific questions and concerns of parents, students, teachers and principals.

CONCERNS OF PARENTS

A major concern of parents is the loss of involvement in their local school. The staunchest school supporter and most zealous educational advocate is the parent who's spent long years building a good personal reputation in the local school. This parent has carved out a sphere of influence and general acceptance of herself and her school-age children. She's invested time and effort while simultaneously reaping a harvest of fulfillment of psychological and emotional needs.[14]

These parents must relinquish a solid position in their local school and begin all over again in a new environment. Concern for their children will be voiced by such questions as:

-Does the new school offer a comparable or better educational system?

-Will the "already-there" students be favored by the teachers and the principal?

-Does the new school offer after-class activity programs; if so, is there a late bus?

-If my child has to walk home will he or she have to cross any major physical barriers (main arteries, hazardous intersections)?[15]

CONCERNS OF STUDENTS

Students are concerned with such potential problems as:

-unknown teachers and principals;

-unknown school and neighborhood;

-children in their classes may not be from their neighborhood;

-loss of the "reputation" gained for the family by mothers, fathers and older brothers and sisters; and

-changes in rules, routines, schedules and "the system."[16]

CONCERNS OF TEACHERS

Teachers also have concerns over the effects of consolidation, including:

-loss of jobs or reassignment;

-loss of established reputation, influence, personal acceptance which they have built over the years in the old school;

-acceptance of themselves, their teaching style, and special abilities by a new principal, new faculty and new community; and

-the necessity of having to "psych out" a new system.[17]

Teachers are also concerned about the instructional program and the children. They wonder what changes might occur in program, class size and teaching conditions.

These concerns can be dealt with through many of the methods already described: committees, task forces, good public relations, visitations, staff involvement, etc., but each district, of course, will have to adapt any suggestions to its own situation and needs.

CONCLUSION

Marilyn Cleveland, former Executive Director of the Alexandria (Virginia) Education Association, sums up consolidation by saying, "School consolidation is not a numbers game; it is a persons game. It has lasting effects on the lives of students, parents, community members, school board members, administrators, and teachers. In the final analysis, consolidation means change.

How teachers cope with it is closely related to how each, as an individual, copes with change. Some see a challenge; others, a threat. In

different ways, each will help students learn one of the most important lessons of their lives: how they, too, can cope with a constantly changing world."[18]

NOTES

[1]Paul A. Shelly, "We kept the community in mind when the time came to close schools," American School Board Journal, November 1983, p. 48.

[2]Ellen Bussard, School Closings and Declining Enrollment (New York, New York: Ellen Educational Facilities Labs., Inc., 1981), ERIC Document ED 209 730, p. 38.

[3]Ibid., p. 38.

[4]William J. Jones, Building Public Confidence for Your Schools (Arlington, Virginia: National School Public Relations Association, 1978), ERIC Document ED 150 725, pp. 138-139.

[5]Robert T. Greene, Cornelia Belsches and Maris Mladenoff, "Richmond's Progressive Solution To Declining High School Enrollments," Phi Delta Kappan, May 1980, p. 616.

[6]Arlene S. Uslander, "We All Survived: The Last Days of Sharp Corner School," Teacher, April 1978, p. 80.

[7]Robert E. Lucas, Lincoln Heights-Princeton Merger-Five Years Later (Columbus Ohio: Ohio State Dept. of Education: Office of Equal Educational Opportunity, 1976), ERIC Document ED 120 322, p. 4.

[8]Ibid., p. 140.

[9]Ibid.

[10]National School Boards Association, Declining Enrollment (Evanston, Illinois, 1976), p. 17.

[11]Shelly, p. 48.

[12]American Association of School Administrators, Declining Enrollment: What to Do (Arlington, Virginia, 1974), p. 15.

[13]Bussard, p. 38.

[14]American Association of School Administrators, p. 11.

[15]Ibid., p. 25.

[16]Ibid., p. 26.

[17]Ibid., p. 25.

[18]Marilyn J. Cleveland and Tricia Gibbons, "School Closings Affect Teachers--the Alexandria, Virginia Story," Today's Education, February-March 1980, p. 47.

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